

The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, affiliated loosely with the World Council of Churches, sent the attached letter of concern to the International AIDS Conference organizers regarding the mistreatment of faith-based organizations at the recent conference.

The letter is also available on-line at: <http://www.e-alliance.ch/hivaids/actionletters.htm>

14th International HIV/AIDS Conference
Barcelona

July 7 2002

Mr Stefano Vella, President
International AIDS Society
Folkungagatan 49
102 65 Stockholm
Sweden

Dear Mr Vella:

Under-representation of faith based organizations in the conference agenda

We wish to express our serious concern at the near-absence of faith-based groups from the agenda of the 14th International HIV/AIDS Conference in Barcelona. Many submissions were made, under the headings of workshops, satellite meetings, posters, NGO exhibition booths and skill-building events. Almost all submissions were rejected. 'Working within religious organizations' featured only once in the skill-building workshops, despite the fact that so much has been learned since the Durban conference, and despite the urgent need to share this learning.

Consequences have been as follows.

- New learning has not been shared.
- Important opportunities for networking and the strengthening of international contacts have been lost.
- Distant meeting venues have had to be found, involving extra expense and time-consuming travel.

We find this situation unacceptable. UNGASS stated and UNAIDS continues to state that faith-based organizations are crucial actors in the response to the epidemic. Since Durban, it has made it a priority to promote networking, capacity building, leadership empowerment and information sharing among such organizations. Why has this not been reflected in the Barcelona programme?

We urge you to investigate this situation, and to ensure that future conference organizers are encouraged to reflect UNAIDS' priorities in a more balanced way. In particular, as you begin the process of planning for Thailand in 2004, we would urge that you provide for:

- Space for prayer and reflection at the conference site
- Assignment of conference chaplains of different faiths
- Skill-building workshops on topics relating to combating HIV/AIDS from a faith perspective
- A plenary speaker or speakers on issues relating to faith-based experience in combating stigma and discrimination
- An appropriate number of scholarships for faith-based representatives
- Access to meeting space at the conference venue for faith-based organizations and networks
- A reasonable number of exhibition booths for the most significant faith-based NGOs and networks engaged in this work.

We would appreciate your reply, and look forward to working with you in common purpose in the future. Already representatives of faith communities are beginning to plan for their presence and local activities in Thailand. A response may be addressed to: Dr Manoj Kurian, World Council of Churches, 150 route de Ferney, PO Box 1200, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland.

EXPLANATORY NOTE ON ECUMENICAL ADVOCACY ALLIANCE WEBSITE:
<http://www.e-alliance.ch/hivaids/actionletters.htm>

A Call for the World AIDS Conference to Ensure the Presence and Participation of Faith-Based Organizations at the 2004 Conference in Bangkok

Participants in the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, ecumenical representatives, and other supportive individuals have written to the Secretariat of the World AIDS Conference to,

"...express our serious concern at the near-absence of faith-based groups from the agenda of the 14th International HIV/AIDS Conference in Barcelona. Many submissions were made, under the headings of workshops, satellite meetings, posters, NGO exhibition booths and skill-building events. Almost all submissions were rejected. 'Working within religious organizations' featured only once in the skill-building workshops, despite the fact that so much has been learned since the Durban conference, and despite the urgent need to share this learning."

Please join us by printing a copy of the letter and collecting signatures. You may send it directly to the International AIDS Society or forward it to the World Council of Churches where they will be collected and presented to the IAS (Dr. Manoj Kurian, World Council of Churches, 150 route de Ferny, P.O. Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland).

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ZENIT News Agency, The World Seen from Rome

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AIDS Conference Excludes Vatican

VATICAN CITY, JULY 11, 2002 (Zenit.org).- The Catholic Church looks after one out of every four people suffering from AIDS, yet the 14th International Conference on AIDS, held this week in Barcelona, Spain, excluded the Vatican's participation.

"We do not understand why the Vatican was not invited," Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragán told the Roman agency I Media. He added that 26% of all AIDS-treatment centers in the world are Catholic facilities.

The Church should be recognized as "the most important partner" among U.N. members in terms of response to AIDS, the archbishop said. As such, the Vatican "has the right to have its opinions heard," he added.

[ZENIT on Wednesday reported on comments by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, the Vatican's permanent observer at the United Nations in Geneva, regarding the document prepared for the conference. In fact, he made his comments outside the official context of the conference.]

Archbishop Lozano Barragán lamented that the conference was focusing on the erroneously called "safe sex" -- that is, the distribution of condoms -- as a response to the AIDS epidemic.

U.N. officials "have been saying the same thing constantly for the past dozen years," despite the fact that their approach has produced "no visible results," the archbishop said. On the contrary, the "number of AIDS victims is rising, in a terribly important trend," he added.

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